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IS FRANCE DYING?

BY WILLIAM H. SCHEIFLEY

FRANCE could be menaced by no greater peril than depopulation. In comparison, her other problems assume secondary importance. Rousseau, with all his sentimental sophistry, had one sound sociological maxim, namely, that there is for a country no worse dearth than that of inhabitants. Societies, like organic beings, live from a capital of energy. Since social capital consists of citizens, diminution of this wealth entails a corresponding loss of vitality, and a rapid decline in the birth rate points to defective social organization. Before the war, the population of Russia was increasing annually by almost two million, that of Germany by 900,000, that of Great Britain and Italy by 400,000 and 350,000, respectively. France, on the other hand, in eight different years, had exhibited a decrease in population. Since 1914, moreover, in her seventy-seven Departments that escaped invasion, civilian deaths have exceeded births by 900,000. As early as 1911 Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, the eminent economist, in summing up the situation, declared: "Such is the fatal refrain which sounds the knell of the nation." Last year, Dr. G. Variot wrote:

Even before 1914 the situation of France was desperate; what shall we say now, since during the war her birth rate has diminished more than half? Today the depopulation of France is so menacing that we must resort to measures energetic, radical, heroic. Our eastern neighbors have long prophesied that the numerous sons of their prolific race would come and despoil the one-child families of France.

Had the German Emperor but exercised patience, France would have fallen into his lap like a ripe fruit.

In Caesar's time, Gaul numbered eight million inhabitants. Beginning with the Middle Ages, France increased century after century amidst neighbor countries then forming. In the days of Francis I (1515-1547), Frenchmen constituted almost half the population of Europe. Under

Louis XIV they formed a third, and at the outbreak of the Revolution a fourth. This relative proportion France maintained by reason of her large families. Under Francis I these families averaged seven children each; under Louis XIV five; in 1789 four; in 1870 three; and by 1914 the average had declined to two. Obviously, the country did not heed the warning of Erckmann and Chatrian, who in *L' Ami Fritz* (1876) affirmed: "*Les peuples qui cessent de Croître marchent à la decadence.*" In the forty-three years following the treaty of Frankfort, Germany gained upon France twenty-eight million inhabitants, or fifteen times the equivalent of Alsace and Lorraine. Small wonder that scores of French books should have been devoted of late to depopulation. Statesmen, sociologists, economists, physicians, magistrates, men of letters, all have considered the national peril. Societies have been formed to combat it, commissions appointed to investigate it. Indeed, the literature of the subject in volume and importance deserves comparison with the famous *Cahiers* of 1789. The scourge having been attributed to no fewer than sixty different causes, Paul Margueritte declares that a problem so complex and formidable demands not one, nor ten, but a hundred measures, individual, administrative, national. Georges Rossignol, in his penetrating study, *Un Pays de Celibataires et de Fils Uniques*, goes even further, demanding the convocation of a national assembly to deal with the menace.

This salutary alarm is relatively recent. For years French legislators of the radical *bloc*, concerned primarily with "politics," refused to give serious thought to a question which they regarded as essentially moral and economic. Being devoted, moreover, to the ideals of the Revolution, they suspected the apostles of repopulation of reactionary motives, of seeking to discredit the parliamentary regime. History seemed to furnish justification for disregarding the peril. In antiquity Plato and Aristotle, fearing overpopulation, advised violent means for checking fertility, though later both Greece and Rome suffered from dearth of inhabitants. Down through the centuries war, famine, and pestilence thinned the population. But the eighteenth century witnessed a return to the fears of the ancients, as we know from such writers as Montesquieu, Buffon, the Marquis de

Mirabeau, and Arthur Young. The doctrine received in consecration from Malthus, who, in his *Essay on Population* (1798), endeavored to establish the fact that the inhabitants of a country, doubling every twenty-five years, multiply in geometric progression (1, 2, 4, 8), whereas their means of subsistence increase only in arithmetical progression (1, 2, 3, 4). Owing to this so-called law, the young English pastor argued that there was danger of man's being left without a place at the banquet of nature.

Even before the publication of Malthus's *Essay*, certain Revolutionary leaders had expressed the conviction that France was too densely populated. According to Collot d'Herbois and Carrier, prominent instruments of the Terror, political executions should stop only after the destruction of twelve or fifteen million Frenchmen. Similarly, Guffroy wrote: "Let the guillotine operate throughout the Republic; five million inhabitants will be enough for France." The fear of excessive population persisted for many years, even among certain economists and statesmen. For example, Thiers, with all his sagacity, extolled "*les sages population de la Normandie*" (a province excelling in voluntary restriction). In 1852, the city of Versailles offered handsome premiums to encourage sterility among the poor. As late as 1877 Joseph Garnier, a zealous disciple of Malthus, declared that the demand for larger families was absurd, inhuman, and contrary to the interests of society, particularly of the poor. Even Malthus, who reckoned six children to a family, was less extreme. Had he foreseen the present birth rate of France, he would have decried depopulation still more earnestly than its opposite.

Between overpopulation and depopulation, both of which are social maladies, a regular birth rate indicates social health. Normal natality corresponds to economic equilibrium, which may be upset by extremes of wealth or poverty. This equilibrium arises from the satisfactory adjustment of the income of the family head to the needs of his dependents. "Neither the *rentier* nor the indigent," writes Gaston Rageot in his admirable book *La Natalite*, "conduces to social health. To say that wealth begets sterility is as false as to say that poverty begets fecundity. It is not wealth that sterilizes, but unproductivity; not poverty that increases fertility, but industry. Social pathology exhibits

the same symptoms as the mental pathology of the individual. A people declining reproduces feature for feature the disintegration of a mind diseased. Its collective conscience shrinks, its national organism becomes stunted, its mental level descends. A nation in full vitality, while producing children, wins battles and acquires wealth, builds monuments, and develops poets and artists, as well as merchants and heroes. Generally prolific, it extends its activities to all parts of the world. A declining nation, on the contrary, not only yields fewer offspring, but exhibits a diminution in genius and the spirit of enterprise. Depopulation leads to luxury, vice, and indolence, eventually to alcoholism, tuberculosis, and demagoguery."

The causes of depopulation are as complex and subtle, as intangible and elusive as those of life itself. Gaston Rageot, who considers depopulation essentially a sociological question, though stated in physical, biological, moral, and political terms, cautions us against hoping to find a definite cause. The decline in the French birth rate, he declares, is due chiefly to the lack of adaptation between a monarchical, Christian family and an egalitarian, lay democracy. Social movements are determined by mystic forces: religion, patriotism, belief in happiness, in progress. The greatest social crises correspond to the substitution of one ideal for another, as, for example, the rise of Christianity, the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times, the shift of point of view beginning with the French Revolution. Such transitions presuppose disintegration, and are accompanied, in the peoples that undergo them, by great expenditures of psychic energy.

Since the Revolution, France has experienced just such a transition. That upheaval destroyed the moral conceptions of ancient France, and offered, as the sole guide to conduct, the interest of the individual. By degrees society has been organized for the individual at the expense of the family. The family presupposes a hierarchy; democracy presupposes equality; the family is based on authority, democracy on liberty. What the one had built up in France the other tends to destroy, the modern French social order being conducive to disruption of the family hierarchy. Man, once the priest and husband in the home, is now too often merely the lover. Whereas formerly he held his wife by

divine right, or by legal authority, he today holds her by the fragile bonds of passion. Why should he make her bear children, especially if she wants none? Nor is the economic order more favorable to the family head, since the State, not content with emancipating his wife and children, claims the right to dispose of his property as well.

These conditions recall Renan's strictures on the French social organism as it resulted from the Revolution:

A code of laws which seem to have been made for an ideal citizen born a foundling and dying a celibate; a code which converts everything into life annuities; in which children are an incumbrance for their father; in which all collective, permanent creation is forbidden; in which moral unities—the only vital ones—are dissolved at each generation; in which the shrewd fellow is an egotist who arranges his life so as to have the fewest duties possible. . . .

Accordingly, the father, being deprived of his authority, moral, legal, and material, has become a variable concept, moving toward zero. Should he be blamed for not establishing a large progeny? Hence A. L. Galeot, in *L'Avenir de la Race*, concludes that the depopulation of France is the direct consequence of its social organization. He argues that if France is not prolific, her institutions are to blame.

Among the moral forces of a country, religion is of prime importance. In France, with the dissolution of national unity, religion has lost its legal character, marriage remaining a sacrament only incidentally. Thus, what was formerly the essential feature of matrimony has become an accessory; what was obligatory is optional. According to Leroy-Beaulieu, the Catholic religion, more than any other, teaches resignation to one's lot and condemns selfishness, exalting sentiments favorable to large families, and frowning upon those that tend to diminish the number of children. His argument he substantiates by the example of French Canada, where, even today, families number from ten to twelve children. In his indictment of the present regime in France he writes (1911):

When our system of education and our administration shall have succeeded in *civilizing* the remaining primitive Departments, the birth rate will again take a terrible drop. Had all France enjoyed since 1861 the birth rate of the Department of Finistère, we should have gained 400,000 inhabitants a year. If, on the other hand, the entire country had

had the rate of Lot-et-Garonne, we should have lost seven or eight million. Yet, it is the mentality of this latter Department that our public education seeks to disseminate, and the mentality of Finistère that it endeavors to suppress.

He concluded that, unless the French wish to rush headlong into national suicide, their Government must cease the odious war which for a quarter of a century, and especially the last fifteen years, it has waged against the traditional faith. Etienne Lamy takes the same view, declaring that the doctrine rejected by the Government sustains the family and perpetuates France, whereas the doctrine adopted diminishes and destroys nations.

As opposing these conservative writers, certain others defend the present radical tendencies. Progress, development of the intelligence, they assert, is excellent and desirable. Science, industry, material prosperity, justice, all are wholesome; it is only their sum total which may become an evil like too rich food for a weak stomach. It is not sufficient to become civilized; it is necessary to acquire strength by the process. The application of science to nature constitutes one of the most powerful stimulants of social life, but it is fatiguing, upsetting, even destructive. Every time you advance education and raise the individual intellectually, making him independent of natural impulses and hardship, you enable him, by liberating him from instinct, say these writers, to defeat the inclination to procreate. But this is only a temporary evil which indicates that evolution is but half completed. The individual is no longer a creature of nature, nor as yet governed by moral law. Continue to develop him. For instinct substitute an ideal. Superficial culture exercises a sterilizing effect; thorough culture will favor a high birth rate.

Among further causes of depopulation, it should be noted that children are no longer a source of profit to their parents in agriculture and industrial work. Moreover, personal and family ambition, the increased competition in all careers, excessive frugality, on the one hand, and a taste for luxury and amusement, on the other, tend to retard marriage and to make couples limit their offspring. Most of these phenomena may be grouped under the heading "social capillarity," the importance of which no economist will deny. Arsene Dumont, indeed, regards it as the principal

source of depopulation. Says Leroy-Beaulieu: "Every man desires for his family a continuous social rise. Many hope to achieve this by preventing a division of their estates. Accordingly, they consent to rear a second child as insurance against accident or to vary the sexes; a third they accept as a regrettable surprise; a fourth they deem an unpardonable mistake."

Still other causes of depopulation are desertion of the country for the cities, intemperance, wet nursing, venereal disease, the feminist movement, divorce, and free love. People cannot, of course, be prevented from emigrating to the cities, if they so prefer. But the curtailment of alcoholism would check infant mortality, insanity, and tuberculosis. Happily the war has for the present done away with absinthe. Nor, since the enactment of the Roussel law, is wet nursing the evil that it was formerly. But venereal disease, which constantly increases, continues to be at once the chief cause of infant mortality and of more than half the involuntary sterility in France. Feminism, too, or the "masculinization" of woman, tends to decrease marriages. As for divorce, competent authorities point out that many a woman, in view of a possible subsequent marriage, desires to preserve her beauty from the disfiguring effects of motherhood. As Maurice Donnay expresses it in *The Torrent*, French women are impressed with the fact that "childbearing deforms a woman, making her look like a sack of coal." Although marriage in France be normal, every free union accentuates race suicide, since, as a rule, the woman, realizing the fragility of the bonds that unite her to her partner, refuses to bear children.

It still remains to consider the most serious cause of French depopulation—abortion. In recent years this criminal form of neo-Malthusianism, characterized by one writer as "social gangrene," has assumed alarming proportions. In a doctoral dissertation on *Depopulation* (1910), Gilbert Andre affirms, "A matron arrested at Roubaix has confessed to having practised ten thousand abortions." Dr. Paul Landroy, formerly president of the French Medical Society, avers that the number of abortions now exceeds the number of births; and Dr. Lacasagne, professor at the University of Lyons, estimates such cases at from 450,000 to 500,000 annually. Fantastic as

these figures may seem, Etienne Lamy, writing in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, declares that in the large cities the number of cases equals and occasionally exceeds births, and in all France attains 300,000 each year. Little wonder that Joseph Turquan, the noted statistician, should exclaim: "It is most urgent to kill neo-Malthusianism before it kills us, to stamp out abortion with a law carrying drastic penalties against the women who practice it and against all who become their accomplices!" At present, unfortunately, prosecution for this crime is rare, and, as a rule, the jury renders a verdict of acquittal.

It should be noted, however, that Malthus is nowise to blame for the vicious practices that bear his name. On the contrary, his doctrine, albeit often misrepresented by writers unfamiliar with the facts, was highly ascetic, teaching continence and chastity. Though introduced into France later than in England, neo-Malthusianism is now the more practised in the former country, where it has its organizations, journals, and apostles. The *League of Voluntary Procreation* has properly been dubbed by Gautier de Clagny the *League of National Suicide*.

This array of causes for French depopulation is at least imposing. Were remedies for the scourge as definite, the beginning of a cure might be expected. Here, however, just as in diagnosing the case, opinions are bound to differ. Yet, all are agreed that France needs annually 1,500,000 births instead of 750,000, the pre-war average. Of her eleven million married couples, almost two million are childless, three million have but one child to a family, and more than two million have but two children. The remaining four million have three or more. Accordingly, whereas one-third tend to augment the race, approximately two-thirds let it decline. Whether the decline has gained such momentum that it cannot be checked is the question.

Moral remedies can alone be truly efficacious, but material remedies may be helpful at first. Gaston Rageot suggests that as an urgent temporary palliative the State offer for children whatever they may cost. He thinks that France, if willing to pay the price, may obtain in the provinces as many as desired. In 1911 Leroy-Beaulieu estimated the bonuses for encouraging the rearing of a third child (500 francs) at one hundred and eighty-seven

million francs annually. Few would now, however, deem this premium a sufficient inducement. In fact, Paul Benazet has introduced in Parliament a bill guaranteeing to every mother 500 francs for each of her first two children, 1,000 for the third, and 2,000 for the fourth. True, as Georges Deherme remarks in *Croitre ou Disparaitre*, premiums would tempt chiefly those least fit to rear children; but present circumstances permit of no choice.

Further encouragement of large families might be offered in the form of exemption from military service, lower taxes, cheap house rent, and preference for governmental appointment. Moreover, numerous writers demand for voters with children plural suffrage. Joseph Turquan would grant to every father as many votes as he has children under age plus unmarried daughters. In 1915, the French Government recalled from the front all fathers of six or more children. Another concession demanded for heads of families is modification of the inheritance laws in order to enable fathers to will their property as they may see fit, preventing the morselling of their land or estate at death. The necessity of evading the present law is said to cause many families to limit offspring to one.

Along with encouragements and concessions, the State may also use compulsion and repression. Paul Margueritte, for example, would so far as possible exact of every couple four children. From those who have but one child he would take three-fourths of their property; from those with two, half; and so on. The unmarried, as "slackers of life," would forfeit all to the State. Nor should abortionists escape, though it be easier to legislate than to enforce laws against them. Now that the physician has become a "lay confessor," it ought to be his duty to aid in eradicating abortion instead of abetting it. "He should attain this end," says Gilbert Andre, "by encouraging maternity at every opportunity."

Aside from the efforts of individuals and the influence of legislators, a campaign of civic and moral education must be waged. Only by this means can lasting reform be effected. It will be necessary to dispel in the younger generation the "fear of life," as Henry Bordeaux terms it, and to reform national manners, altering the mental state which has led France into social aberrations so destructive

that increase in the birth rate is of vital importance to all; that unless this be quickly attained, the ruin of France will result. It is by appealing to individual advantage that fecundity can best be stimulated. National economy, in its healthiest form, implies a reciprocity of rights and duties between the individual and society. Could selfish interests and the general weal be reconciled, the question of repopulation would be solved. The average person conceives of society as an abstraction. Let the citizen but feel the weakness of his country, and depopulation will appear to him forthwith as a pathetic reality. As Paul Deschanel, president of the Chamber of Deputies, has said, this grave problem demands national co-operation—the collaboration of the State, the departments, the communes, of societies and individuals, legislative efforts and private initiative. Despite the repugnant failure of Zola's *Fecondite*, let us hope, urges R. Lepine, that some man of letters may reawaken in French women of the higher classes a passion for motherhood.

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